

WHEN EAST MEETS WEST DOCTORS SEE PLUSES TO ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE

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When Dr. Steven Barrett, a family doctor with a practice in Manchester-by-the-Sea, spoke with an acupuncturist about a mutual patient's back problem, he was surprised to hear words such as harmony and balance.

"It's a different language," he said. "Alternative providers speak about health in totally different terms than the medical profession. You almost need somebody to translate. Now, doctors and patients have that someone. It's Dr. Stephanie Stevens, a cardiologist and specialist in alternative therapies, who is medical director of the new Integrative Medicine Program for Northeast Health Systems, which includes Addison Gilbert Hospital in Gloucester, Beverly Hospital, and the Hunt Center in Danvers.

"I see my role as creating a bridge" between the two approaches, said Stevens, adding that three-quarters of people who participate in alternative therapies don't tell their doctors. She wants that to change.

"We're talking about nourishing the entire individual," she said. "We want to combine the best of both approaches."

According to recent studies, increasing numbers of people -- 50 percent of the population -- seek alternative therapies. A survey of communities served by Northeast Health Systems also showed 43 percent want more access to alternative medicine.

"We realized that while we did technically wonderful care, patients were going to alternative providers as well," said Barrett, former president of the medical staff at Northeast Health Systems. "We realized we needed to incorporate other approaches that we didn't embrace in traditional medicine and a personalized kind of care. And it had to be done in a careful, supervised and thoughtful manner."

The Integrative Medicine Program, which opened in the spring, is "coordinated so we're working together, learning from each other and helping patients," Barrett said. Stevens came on board in May.

"She's very dynamic and bright and committed to this idea," said Barrett, chairman of the physician advisory committee. "She understands both sides of the dynamic."

"Dr. Stevens is a wonderful mediator," said Florence Gaia, a registered nurse and holistic psychotherapist with a practice in Ipswich. "She has credibility with the medical community as a doctor and yet she is very open-minded and progressive in terms of approach and bringing in holistic modalities."

Stevens graduated from Harvard Medical School, and completed her residency in internal medicine at Brigham and Women's Hospital and her cardiovascular medicine fellowship at New England Medical Center. She is board-certified in cardiovascular medicine and internal medicine.

While working at St. Elizabeth's Medical Center in Boston, Stevens was invited by Dr. Pamela Pettinati to become medical director of the hospital's new Alternative and Complementary Medicine Program.

"In a short time, something remarkable happened," Stevens said. "I saw a lot of healing going on at the hands of these practitioners. I saw people who in some cases had suffered for 20 to 30 years who were literally being cured.

"I didn't know what the mechanism was," she said. "My Western mind was saying, 'How can these things be working?' But the scientist in me was able to step aside and look at things as an intelligent human being."

She began learning more about alternative therapies and became a patient. "You have to be a product of what you are doing," Stevens said. "The more I experienced, the more I realized there was a richness to many of these therapies. I was personally benefiting and I felt so many patients would."

After arriving at her new job, Stevens's first step was to find alternative practitioners in the community who were willing to work in an integrative program, collaborating, communicating and, in many cases, teaching Western-trained

physicians.

The program now offers **acupuncture**, ayurveda, herbal medicine, chiropractic, homeopathy, massage therapy, polarity therapy, reiki, and zero balancing. There are classes in mindfulness meditation, yoga, qi gong, and t'ai chi. And there are programs using alternative therapies for smoking cessation, pain management, treatment of fibromyalgia and arthritis, cardiovascular wellness, preparing for surgery, preparing for childbirth, weight management, irritable bowel syndrome, and living with cancer. discomfort, pain and disease.

The Women's Health Center of the North Shore in Danvers, which is part of North Shore Medical Center, also has an "East meets West" approach, said Dr. Mitchell Rein, chief of obstetrics and gynecology and director of women's services.

It has acupuncturists, massage therapists, meditation, relaxation, aroma therapy, yoga and reiki. "It's a pretty well-integrated combination," Rein said. "Working together is effective."

A popular program at the center, Rein said, is the fertile energy program. "In the last class, the majority of patients got pregnant during the eight-week course," he said. Rein said other areas where alternative therapies seem to help are chronic pelvic pain and menopause.

Stevens said patients who come to her usually have chronic complaints that have not been relieved by traditional approaches. "They are looking to improve their overall quality of life and health status," she said. The typical profile is a woman, highly educated, with a good income, since most alternative therapies are not paid for by insurance.

Stevens spends about 1 1/2 hours with each patient. She reviews their situation "through a Western lens," and looks for a medical explanation. Then, she said, "I put that aside and go beyond it. I want to hear about their life, what the issues are that they are dealing with."

"It's always remarkable to me how often people's physical complaints have root in something that happened to them at some previous time in life, an unresolved issue. It's the mind-body connection," she said. "No two person's headaches are the same. It always made sense to me that we couldn't be reduced to body parts. We deserve being looked at as whole, complex individuals."

Her job is to suggest what therapies would be best for the patient. "Depending on where they are in their life, they may not be interested in some of the options," Stevens said. "I try to figure out what they are ready for and what's the next best step for them. Ultimately, it's a decision they make."

Stevens also works with the physicians. "I can monitor the care their patient is receiving and communicate back," she said. But it isn't always easy.

Both Barrett and Stevens report resistance from some physicians to alternative practices. "A lot of it is fear of the unknown and what we don't understand," Stevens said. "A lot of times it's hard to articulate what alternative therapy folks do. I want to be able to present it to the medical community."

Stevens said a common misconception is that practitioners of alternative therapies recommend that it replace traditional treatment. "You need a little bit of both," Stevens said. "There's a false impression of how people use these therapies; it's not a wholesale rejection of Western conventional medicine. The scenario is not that cancer patients by the hundreds are going to suddenly forsake seeing their oncologist and give up chemotherapy, radiation, or surgical treatments."

Rather, she said, alternative therapies can help cancer patients manage pain, alleviate nausea caused by treatment, ease muscle spasms, lift depression, and enhance relaxation.

And while weaning patients off medication is sometimes a goal of alternative therapy, Stevens said, "I can't envision the day I'd ever say to someone with diabetes, 'Stop taking your insulin.' There are medications people need."

Pamela Stratton, an acupuncturist at the **Acupuncture** Center of Cape Ann who works with the Integrative Medicine Program, said, "There are few people who come who don't also have traditional care."

"It's always set up as an adversarial relationship and it's not that at all. It about learning to work together for the client," Stratton said.

Stevens said integration of alternative therapies into a hospital setting also provides opportunity for clinical research. For example, she's planning a holistic program for surgical patients that would include preoperative reiki sessions,

which channel energy for healing. Doctors would study the patient's experience during surgery, the length of post-operative hospital stay, pain management, need for medication, and the complication rate.

Rein said such clinical trials can only aid the acceptance of alternative therapies. "The physician community is a little slow coming because the scientific evidence is limited, but it's happening," he said. "You're starting to see those results."

SIDEBAR:

A primer on treatments

Holistic therapies, also called alternative or complementary therapies, share a philosophy that the body has the power to heal itself. The goal is to restore the balance between the mind, body and spirit to allow natural energy to flow and enhance healing.

Acupuncture -- An ancient form of Chinese medicine in which thin needles are inserted at specific points of the body to restore the proper flow of energy. It's believed the disruption of that flow causes disease. It's used for treatment of a range of disorders from asthma to alcoholism, and in pain management.

Acupressure -- Similar to **acupuncture**, but fingertips instead of needles are used to restore the flow of energy.

Ayurveda -- The major traditional holistic healing system of India. Aims to restore the balance of three vital energies through purifying techniques, diet, yoga, breathing, massage and herbal remedies.

Botanical medicine or herbalism -- Uses herbs to promote healing by supporting the body's efforts to restore balance.

Chiropractic -- Facilitates healing by restoring proper spinal alignment through spinal manipulation.

Craniosacral therapy -- A gentle manual therapy that mobilizes and balances the soft tissue, musculoskeletal and craniosacral systems. Used in treatment of chronic pain and dysfunction.

Homeopathy -- Use of minute quantities of natural substances that are said to mimic the patient's symptoms in an otherwise healthy person. In a sick person, it is said to stimulate the person's innate healing ability.

Massage therapy -- Relieves muscle tightness, improves circulation, flushes out waste products, increases range of motion, and reduces scar tissue. It can produce deep relaxation, reduce stress and **anxiety**, alleviate depression, improve sleep, and promote healing and a sense of well-being and vitality.

Polarity -- A blend of Eastern and Western therapies, it's based on the premise that well-being is the unobstructed flow of life energy around the body as current between positive and negative poles. It involves touch, diet, and exercise.

Qi gong -- Ancient Chinese exercise for health and longevity. Therapeutic postures help calm the mind, enhance relaxation and improve strength and vitality.

Reiki -- A form of energy therapy in which practitioners channel universal healing energy through their hands to the patient, who uses it for the "highest healing good." It's described as a feeling of heat or tingling.

Yoga -- A gentle form of exercise that uses postures and breathing techniques to increase strength and flexibility, and relieve stress and **anxiety**.

Zero balancing -- A gentle touch technique that promotes flow of energy by applying pressure to stretch the body's foundation joints. Improves posture and boosts the body's self-healing ability.

For more information, call the Integrative Medicine Program at 888-253-0800.

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